

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Congresswoman Loretta Sanchez (CA-47) and a bipartisan group of lawmakers sent a letter to President Obama urging him to confront Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung about ongoing human rights violations in Vietnam. The Prime Minister is in Washington, D.C. for the Global Nuclear Security Summit.

“More than anything, Vietnam wants the respect and recognition of the international community,” said Rep. Sanchez, who Co-Chairs the Congressional Caucus on Vietnam. “But in order to earn that respect, Vietnam needs to show it is willing to expand basic human rights. As leader of the free world, it is important for the president to take a stand against the abuses taking place in Vietnam and elsewhere. Freedom and democracy only have meaning if we’re willing to put those principles into action, and President Obama is in an excellent position to do so today.”

In addition to sending a letter to President Obama, Reps. Sanchez, Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), Daniel Lungren (R-CA), and Joseph Cao (R-LA) also sent a letter to the Vietnamese Prime Minister, asking him to release democracy advocates Tran Khai Thanh Thuy and her husband, Mr. Do Ba Tan. Ms. Thuy and Mr. Tan are both appealing significant prison sentences they received for their activism, even though international covenants on human rights and Vietnamese law both identify peaceful political expression as a basic freedom and not a crime.

The full text of Rep. Sanchez’s letter to President Obama can be found below:

“Dear President Obama:

“As a President who has demonstrated strong determination to restore honor to democracy, we would like to express our serious concerns regarding ongoing human rights violations in Vietnam. As you are aware, Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung will visit Washington, D.C., for the Global Nuclear Security Summit, and we strongly urge you to take this opportunity to convey our serious concerns about Vietnam’s ongoing religious and human rights violations and take a meaningful step to help advance religious freedom and related human rights in Vietnam.

“In its March 2009 Human Rights Report, the U.S. Department of State provided the following findings in regards to Vietnam:

‘The [Vietnamese] government’s human rights record remained a problem. Citizens could not change their government, and political opposition movements were prohibited. During the year the government increased its suppression of dissent, arresting several political activists and convicting others arrested in 2008. Several editors and reporters from prominent newspapers were fired for reporting on official corruption and outside blogging on political topics, and bloggers were detained and arrested for criticizing the government. The government continued to limit citizens’ privacy rights and tightened controls over the press and freedom of speech, assembly, movement, and association. The government maintained its prohibition of independent human rights organizations. Violence and discrimination against women as well as trafficking in persons continued to be significant problems. The government limited workers’ rights to form and join independent unions.’

“This report clearly illustrates Vietnam’s severe violation of the human rights outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. We thank the U.S. Department of State and the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi for being responsive to our inquiries about Vietnam’s oppression towards human rights. However, public statements such as ‘Vietnam contradicts its own commitment to internationally accepted standards of human rights and the rule of law’ which was made by the U.S. Department of State are simply not enough.

“As you and U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Rodham Clinton have reiterated regarding the Administration’s human rights agenda for the 21st Century, outlining the Administration’s approach to putting our human rights principles into action, Vietnam must be on our agenda. We must give voice to many advocates and activists who are working on the front lines of the global human rights movement.

“Understanding the impact of the Internet, Members of the Congressional Caucus on Vietnam have spent the last year taking proactive steps advocating for the protection of internet freedom in Vietnam and urging internet service providers (ISPs) like Google and Yahoo to protect the privacy of internet users in Vietnam, while the Government of Vietnam has taken unlawful steps to tighten its control over the internet. In 2009, the government called on internet service providers to block access to a number of websites, including Facebook. In addition, popular sites calling for democratic reforms are continuously being firewalled by the government, and targeted for cyber-attacks in the form of “DDOS” (distributed denial-of-service) attack.

“In the aftermath of the cyber attacks in China, Google recently discovered another cyber threat targeting Vietnamese computer users around the world. This threat used malware to infect the computers of people with Vietnamese keyboard language software. This is yet another attempt to suppress opinions and dissent.

“We share your commitment to preventing internet censorship. We believe that the freedoms of expression, access to information, and political participation are universal rights. They should be available to all people, including ethnic and religious minorities, whether they are in the United States, Vietnam or any other state.

“We call on you to convey our serious concerns over the conditions of human rights and religious freedom in Vietnam to Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung. We hope that you will use Prime Minister Dung’s upcoming visit as an opportunity to address the concerns we have described and discuss the significant improvements Vietnam must make regarding human rights and religious freedom.

“It’s time for our country to actually penalize these abuses and place Vietnam back on the State Department’s Countries of Particular Concern list.

“Thank you for your consideration.”

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